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Mine Action and the Environment

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initial iraq landmine impact survey completed

by faiz paktian [ genesva international centre for humanitarian demining ]

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Mine Action and the Environment

While global warming is a hot environmental topic these days, and scientists agree that unless we act soon to significantly reduce global pollution, average temperatures will continue to rise, causing heat waves, rising sea levels, droughts and wildfires. It is also important to look at mine-action procedures and activities to ensure our industry is in compliance with the world's requirements on environment protection. There is perhaps a need, more than ever before, to remind national mine-action authorities and demining organisations of their responsibility to ensure that demining operations not only be carried out in a safe, effective and efficient manner, but also in a manner that minimises any impact on the environment.

Mine Action and the Environment

Initial Iraq Landmine Impact Survey Completed

The first phase of a three-year survey on 13 of Iraq’s 18 provinces has been completed. The Landmine Impact Survey is an important tool for the government of Iraq and international donors, allowing a temporary blueprint to be made for clearance of landmines, unexploded ordnance, abandoned munitions and other explosive remnants of war. Such hazards threaten one in every five Iraqis, according to the U.S. Department of State, whose Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement funded the US$4 million survey.

The survey was conducted in the provinces of Babylon, Basra, Duhok, Dhul-Mar, Erbil, Kirkuk, Missan, Muthanna, Najaf, Qadisiya, Sulaymaniyyah, Tameer and Wasit. Work will proceed in the remaining five provinces—Al-Anbar, Baghdad, Diyala, Nineva and Salah ad-Din—as security conditions permit.

The survey will allow the government and international donors to improve the allocation of demining and clearance resources. It was completed, the State Department reports, by Iraqi citizens, including teachers and doctors, and was done via foot, car, tractor and even donkey. The survey also helped shed light on communities and villages not known to exist, opening these communities to outside resources.

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I n its continued efforts to provide the mine-action community with consistent and globally relevant International Mine Action Standards, the United Nations Mine Action Service and the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining have been involved in the development of a standard on the protection of the environment. This standard will provide guidelines as to the minimum measures to guarantee environments affected by demining operations, particularly stockpile destruction, are safe and fit for their intended use once demining operations are completed.

*When we talk about “environment,” we mean the surrounding in which an organisation operates. The new standard will emphasise that demining operations should be carried out in a way that minimizes damage to property and infrastructure and is safe for local communities and demining staff.* Planning for demining operations must take into account the effects of operations and any supporting activities, on the environment, and astute possible damage to property, infrastructure or personnel. Demining organisations should ensure that the land over which demining operations have taken place— including land used for administrative or support purposes, such as temporary accommodation facilities and support areas—is suitable for its intended use once demining operations cease. Particular attention should be given to property, infrastructure or land required for substantiation or economic purposes to ensure that these activities can continue after demining operations have been completed.

*Activities That May Damage the Environment* Demining operations have the potential to damage the environment in which they are conducted. This damage not only includes the short-term effects caused by demobilisation activities, but also long-term effects that may be caused by contamination of soil and water systems, removal of vegetation, disruption to watersources or changes to soil structure. Demining operations may also damage the natural habitats of insects and wildlife and affect areas of historical or cultural significance. The following are some excerpts from the forthcoming standard that discusses potential demining activities that may damage the environment:

*Use of machines in support of mine clearance.* Where mechanical operations involve the removal of vegetation, or occur on ground that may be subject to erosion, demining organisations must ensure that, as far as practically possible, measures are taken to secure the regeneration of vegetation and to limit erosion.

*Explosive ordnance disposal.* Mines and explosive remnants of war should be disposed of in a manner that minimizes environmental impact without creating damage to property or infrastructure. If mines or ERW must be destroyed in situ and there is a risk to property or infrastructure, protective measures must be taken. If, even with these measures there is still a risk of damage to property or infrastructure, authorities and local communities must be consulted about the operation.

*Disposal of debris, rubble and wire.* Debris, rubble, wire and any other remains of obstacles removed from a demining worksite must be disposed of in accordance with local waste-management regulations and requirements of the national authority. When applicable local community should be consulted about each disposal.

*Disposal of toxic and hazardous waste.* Toxic and hazardous waste are not normally found in landmines; however, asbestos chemicals and liquid propellants can be found in missiles and fusing systems. Also, chemical weapons—including chlorine and mustard-gas munitions and depleted-uranium projectiles—may be encountered. Other examples of...
Waste water. Waste water from washing, bathing or kitchen areas must be drained into soak pits large enough to take the amount of water generated.

Domestic waste water. The provision of domestic water to be carried out in a way that minimizes damage to property and infrastructure, unless it is necessary to divert or dam the watercourse to allow doming to be conducted. If it is necessary to divert or dam the watercourse, the landowner or water management authority must be consulted and their agreement obtained before work commences.

Degradation of air quality. When demining organisations are conducting operations, they are to remain aware of the location of local communities, the prevailing wind conditions and the ability of prevailing winds to carry smoke, dust and toxic fumes to local communities. Demining organisations must ensure that the impact on local communities of any degradation of air quality is minimised. When degradation of air quality is likely to affect local communities, doming organisations must liaise with local communities and authorities to explain the scale, scope and duration of any likely air degradation.

The new standard will emphasize that demining operations should be carried out in a way that minimizes damage to property and infrastructure and is safe for local communities and demining staff.

Burning of vegetation. Burning of vegetation should be avoided, where vegetation burning is necessary, proper procedures and control measures should be applied. Plans for burning vegetation should be discussed with, and approved by, the land owner/users and local authorities. Burning should not be carried out at night or commence into the night; no burning should be started unless there are sufficient personnel and firefighting equipment on-site to control, and if necessary, stop the burning.

Stockpile-destruction operations. Stockpile destruction operations must be planned and conducted in a manner that minimizes the impact to the environment. If deemed necessary by the national authority, this may include an Environmental Impact Assessment. Worksites and temporary accommodation facilities. Protection of the environment must be considered in the site selection and layout of work sites and temporary accommodation facilities. The establishment and operation of work sites and temporary accommodation facilities must be carried out in a manner that minimizes any contamination of the land or water systems (including groundwater systems) and has minimal effect on flora and the natural habitats of insects or wildlife. Temporary accommodation facilities must comply with all national or local regulations concerning the construction of temporary facilities.

Toilets. Human waste should not be discharged into watercourses or onto the soil surface. Where possible, temporary toilets should be used on all domestic workings and temporary accommodation facilities. Temporary toilets should be equipped with holding tanks that can be pumped to sewage trucks for disposal or connected to septic tanks for safe drainage.

Domestic rubbish. Rubbish removed from the site must be disposed of at approved rubbish-dumping sites. Any rubbish spilled during the removal process is to be cleaned up. Rubbish must only be burned with the approval of the local communities/authorities and then in locations agreed to by them. Rubbish piles must be located away from watercourses and wells and must not contaminate groundwater.

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For additional references for this article, please visit http://tinyurl.com/44a8mg.